They're tough, they're mean, they're trained to kill — but behind their steel-hard cold facades lurk the painful hidden tragedies of their private lives. Experience the real world of the forthcoming Sega release *STREET FIGHTER II*

FIGHT!

***STREETS OF RAGE II* — in a city ruled by criminals four heroes are their kidnapped friend's last hope of survival. Plunge into the murky world of violent guttersnipes where to win all you have are a hot rage and lethal combat skills!**

Street Fighter, Street Fighter II
© CAPCOM 1991, 1992
Streets of Rage, Streets of Rage II
© SEGA ENTERPRISES, Ltd 1992





FREE FROM THE MAKERS OF
SEGA FORCE
THE UNOFFICIAL MAG FOR SEGA GAME-FREAKS

AN impact MAGAZINES SPECIAL

SEGA FORCE PRESENTS ■ STREET FIGHTER II ■ STREETS OF RAGE II — THE NOVELS

SEGA FORCE PRESENTS

FREE!

STREET FIGHTER II

Chris Rice



STREETS OF RAGE II

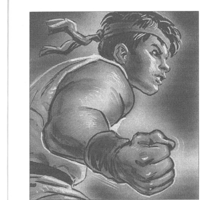
The Novels!

Mat Yeo

Street fighting hell...
With a yell, he charged and launched himself at his opponent. There was an almighty crash as Ryu was thrown headlong out of the ring into the aisles.

A rage of thugs...
They jumped him with knives in their hands. Axel ducked and his foot shot out to catch one of the punks in the stomach. The thug hit the ground almost as fast as he'd left it.

CONTENTS



STREET FIGHTER II

By Chris Rice

This is dedicated to
the office coffee machine, without whose offerings the long nights would not have been the same.

PROLOGUE

In the small Japanese village of Mau Lau there was still no sign of rain. The searing mid-day sun beat down relentlessly upon the arid plains. For a moment the heavy silence was shattered. The screams of vultures fighting over the remains of a rotting carcase, pierced the heavy air. Then all was still.

If you were passing through, you'd have been forgiven for thinking this was just another day in a small border town. But to anybody in the Street Fighting world this was the day every competitor dreamed of. This was championship day.

The air was filled with the smell of noodles frying on open stove. Around a makeshift table, three peasant farmers, cheeks reddened by a combination of sun and the sake they drank from small bamboo cups, were absorbed in a game of Mah Jong. Sitting opposite, a hooded figure carefully studied his tiles. Littered upon the table was a collection of crumpled bank notes. With each tile played, the peasants exchanged nervous glances and whispered heavily under their breath.

Glistening beads of sweat sparkled on the furrowed brow of the man the others referred to as Snake Eyes. Squinting heavily in the blinding sunlight, his khaki vest stained with sweat, he shuffled nervously in his seat. Looking anxiously at the others, he scratched his left wrist casually, then moved to play a tile. Before his arm reached its destination, there was a piercing whistle of cold steel slicing through humid air.

A ghastly shriek of pain shattered the silence as Snake Eyes fell writhing in agony, clutching a severed stump with a ruby red hand. Embedded in the table, a three foot Katana gleamed, blood trickling slowly down the silken blade. On

the table lay a hand, fingers still twitching. It pumped blood which gurgled as it boiled in the sweltering heat.

The shadowy figure slinked towards the contorted figure of Snake Eyes. Casting off his robe, he revealed a scarred face and eyes the colour of emeralds

'I am Vega. The king of all Street Fighters. As I take your life, so I shall take your worthless brother's. No-one will stop me from becoming this year's champion!' A lightning-fast glint of steel flashed, Snake Eyes let out one last deafening scream and then all was silent.

Vega turned to the table and poured himself a drink. Stuffing the crumpled blood-stained notes into his pockets, he took a last look at the corpse, then spat on it. Reaching out for the severed hand, he calmly sliced off the ring finger, twisted off the gold band and slipped it on to his own. Surveying the scene of destruction around him, he threw back his head, laughed, then strode out of the village.

■■■■■

All looked at the scene around the table with horror and revulsion — all except one. Across the square, in a darkened corner under a bamboo shelter, stood a woman, her eyes fixed on the departing figure of Vega. In a rough hand-sewn robe and poorly-fitting sandals, she looked like a simple peasant — only her eyes betrayed the disguise. They were cold, hard and full of hatred as she watched the arrogant figure in the cloak leave. With fists clenched tight, Chun Li bit her lip and waited...

CHAPTER ONE

The sun was setting on a small clearing in the middle of the forest. Three figures stood in half silhouette against the fiery sky. The frail voice of an old man broke the silence. 'No, No, concentrate. You're not thinking clearly, you're allowing your thoughts to be distracted. You must channel your energy.'

The young man standing opposite a large oak shook his head and sighed: 'Ahh, come on. We've been at it for five hours now. Can't we take a break yet, I'm bushed.'

The old man replied: 'You came here to learn. So learn.'

'Yeah but I came here to fight. So far you haven't shown me one kick or punch. You keep telling me to channel my energy and cut down this tree. It's impossible,' fumed the youngster.

'Anything is possible if you put your mind to it.'

'Yeah, so you keep saying — but what's staring at this tree got to do with street fighting?'

'I've told you, before you learn to fight, you must first learn control. You need to discipline your mind. You're young and easily led.'

'But a tree! If I got the chance to fight someone that stood still for even half a second I'd finish him off with the Ken special.'

The old man shook his head and looked to the sky. 'You're young and reckless, I'm too old to waste my time with the likes of you. You don't want to learn, you'll never be Street Fighter champion.'

'That's where you're wrong old man. I will be champion with or without your help.'

The old man turned to the other figure who stood entranced before the almighty oak. 'You've been here for

two weeks and already you think you know it all. You should learn from Ryu. He listens.'

'What, that chump! He knows as well as I do there's no way anyone can knock that tree down without touching it! He's just too chicken to say it to your face.'

The man murmured then turned to the figure dressed in white. 'Ryu, clear your mind and summon the ancient power of Sheng Long. Feel it flow through your veins. Harness the power. Feel the force and direct it at the tree. Remember what I've taught you. Say the word.'

Ken laughed to himself and began to turn away when Ryu let out an almighty cry. Arms outstretched, wrists touching, Ryu called out with all his strength 'Ha-do-ken!' There was a blinding blue flash, the air filled with the smell of smoke then a crashing sound as if the earth was falling down. Ken dived for cover as the two hundred foot oak toppled like a sapling. The forest shook, then all was quiet.

The old man hurried across the clearing to where Ryu's crumpled body lay. Taking him in his arms, he placed two fingers over Ryu's lifeless eyes.

'Is he dead?' asked Ken quietly.

'No, the power's strong and he has yet to learn to control it. Do you still doubt the power of Sheng Long?'

'Yeah I saw it but that was just a lightning bolt, right? He never did that... did he?'

'You have a lot to learn American boy. We must go now, it's getting late and we have a busy day tomorrow. Carry Ryu back to the camp.'

'But it's miles'

'Then why are we standing here talking. Move.'

Ken stooped and draped Ryu's body over his shoulder. Muttering under his breath he began the long march back to the camp.

CHAPTER TWO

When Ryu woke every bone in his body ached. His head was spinning and his stomach felt like it was twisted in knots. He tried to lift himself from the straw mattress but a flash of pain prevented him. He was about to try again when he heard a familiar voice.

The old man walked slowly towards Ryu and placed a wet cloth on his perspiring brow: 'Rest Ryusan. You have trained hard and learnt the first lesson of Sheng Long. Now conserve your strength.'

Ryu tried to sit up and spoke in garbled language 'Master, I'm so ashamed. I have brought disgrace upon the powers of the dragon. I should've concentrated more. I saw him coming towards me with the flying body-attack. I was ready but my mind was dazed. I should've...'

The old man placed his hand over Ryu's mouth and calmed him. 'Shhhh. Ryu, you're dreaming again. That fight is over. You're stronger now. Right now you need to rest.'

'But master, the competition's in three weeks and I've still a lot to learn.'

The old man replied softly: 'You'll be ready. Last night I taught you the power of the Hadoken.'

Straining to sit up Ryu asked 'Ahh... it's coming back to me. I remember thinking my body was going to explode. I felt a wave of energy flash through my body, then a blue light blinding me. I must have blacked out after that. Did I fail you again master?'

'No Ryusan. You did well. You channelled the power of your mind to create the Hadoken, a fireball of psychic energy that can overcome even the strongest enemy. It requires great concentration and saps a lot of energy. Your body isn't strong enough yet but in time it will be. You learn well, one day you'll be Street Fighter champion and I'll be the proud-

est master in Japan.'

'Do you really think I can do it?'

'What I think isn't important. You must believe in yourself.'

'So what time do we begin training? I want to practise the Hadoken again.'

'There's no training for you today. I'll go with the American boy and see if I can make a real fighter out of him. He's all the makings of a champion but he will not listen. The youth of today are so impatient... ahhh but listen to me, the ramblings of a tired old man. Rest and gather your strength.'

The old man left the bamboo hut and walked across the camp. Loud snoring came from the cabin opposite. Pulling back the curtain used for a door the old man entered. The light was dim and it cast shimmering shadows over the walls. The room was covered in pictures of Street Fighters.

The great fighters of the past were there as well as the latest stars; Vega, Sagat, Balrog and Bison. The old man studied the pictures of the new fighters and shook his head. 'These were not true street fighters' he thought to himself. 'They had no respect for the ancient arts of combat and the ways of the masters. They were the new breed. They only cared about money and fame.'

Scanning the wall, his eyes rested on a picture of a young fighter dressed in traditional Sheng Long outfit; white karate suit, black belt and red headband. Underneath, the faded caption read: 'Three-time Street Fighter champion,White Dragon, to retire.'

He studied the face, the mop of jet black hair, the deep set brown eyes and the high cheekbones. Turning to the mirror he touched his scarred face. He looked sadly at his thinning hair and a tear slowly rolled from his narrow tired eyes. 'How the years had been cruel' he thought.

Suddenly Ken leapt from his bed, let out a blood curdling cry and charged at the old man. At the last second, the old man pivoted and threw Ken over his shoulder across the length of the room. There was a loud crash and Ken slowly picked himself up off the floor. Rubbing his bruised body he gasped 'Whatcha doin' you old fool! You could've killed me.'

'Never announce your presence, it gives away the element of surprise.'

'I thought you were a robber.'

'We're in the middle of the Fujimoto forest. There's noone for miles around.'

'Yeah! I know but where I come from you get used to expecting robbers and muggers... besides where did you learn to fight like that? I thought you were into using the mind and all that Confucius stuff, not chucking people across the room. You wanna be careful old man, you'll do yourself an injury! '

'You know nothing American boy, Confucius was Chinese. In Japan we've a different philosophy. Maybe if you studied more and talked less I'd be the one laying on the floor and you'd be the one lecturing me.'

'Big words from an old man. I ought to come over there and knock you out.'

Save your energy. The competition is in three weeks and you've a lot to learn. Get dressed we leave in five minutes.

'But it's Sunday. I need a break, we've been at it non-stop for weeks now. Where's that wimp Ryu? I don't see him ready to go.'

'Forget Ryu. If you want a chance to win, be ready in five minutes.

With that, the old man dusted off his robe and sauntered out of the door. 'Not bad for an old guy' he thought to himself.

CHAPTER THREE

Chun Li was seven years old the day her father died.

While her sisters spent their time playing with dolls and dressing up as princesses, her happiest days were spent with her father in the back yard talking about a recent case he'd solved or the latest drug smuggler he was chasing. This world of mystery and excitement intrigued the young Chun Li. If her father was in a particularly good mood or he'd drunk one beer too many, he'd bring out his shiny whistle and let her pretend to arrest him. She loved the shrill noise it made as the sound pierced though her ears. 'One day' she thought 'I will grow up and be like my father.'

For the two months leading up to her seventh birthday she had relentlessly begged her father to buy her a silver whistle like his. At last the first of March arrived. She woke early, threw back the covers and rushed downstairs to the kitchen. When her mother told her there'd been trouble with opium smugglers at the port and her father had been called away to investigate, she was deeply hurt. She sulked her way through breakfast, feeling unloved and rejected. Her mother tried to cheer her up but Chun Li's thoughts were fixed on her shiny new whistle.

The sun reached it's highest point then fell — still there was no sign of Chun Li's father. The family tried their best to make her birthday a happy occasion but Chun Li was inconsolable. Even when her mother brought in the cake with seven fiery candles, the best she could muster was a half-smile. At eight o'clock there was a knock on the door and Chun Li leapt from her seat and scampered across the kitchen floor. As she opened the door she was met by the small and haggard figure of the chief of Lan Pau police. He looked at Chun Li deeply with soft brown eyes: 'Is your mother home?'

Immediately Chun Li was ushered inside by her mother. 'Go to your room, this minute.' Chun Li ran up the stairs but stopped on the top landing and listened carefully, her heart pounding. She could only see the back of the inspector but she heard the sobs of her mother and she knew her father was not coming home.

She threw herself on her bed and cried so much she was sure she'd choke. When she woke it was still dark. She crept down to the kitchen and fumbled with the lamp.

On the kitchen table lay a police uniform, a gold watch, an uneaten birthday cake and a small square package wrapped in blue ribbon. Tearing open the paper, she uncovered a shiny silver whistle with the engraving 'To my precious Chun Li on her seventh birthday.' The tears welled up inside her so much she thought she'd burst. Fighting back the pain, she picked up the whistle and threw it out of the kitchen window. She ran upstairs, packed a photo and a few treasures into a small canvas bag, then crept silently out of the door into the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

The sun was rising as Ken, Ryu and their master arrived at a clearing in the forest. As ever, Ken was the first to speak: 'What are we stopping here for? You said we're going to practise attacking moves. About time too, the competition's only four days away.'

'Yes' the old man replied wearily 'I know. Ryu, fetch those whine bottles from your bag.'

'This is no time for a drink' interrupted Ken 'There's work to be done if I'm to be crowned Street Fighter champion.'

The old man shook his head and muttered under his breath. 'Ryu, balance the bottle on your head. That's it. Now practise leg sweep, mid-kick and Nerichagi one hundred times each. Every time the bottle falls it's fifty push-ups. Okay, go!

The old man sat down, lit his pipe and studied the styles of Ryu and Ken. Although he'd taught them both exactly the same moves, he was amazed how differently they fought. Ryu, a perfectionist, patient, always willing to learn, utterly devoted to the teachings of Sheng Long, practised the kicks with a calm poise, concentrating on balance and focusing his mind on the task at hand.

Where Ryu was slow and calculating, Ken was hasty and rash. He did everything with an abundance of energy, prefering speed over technique. He raced through his kicks, repeatedly spilling the bottle, then thrashed though his punishment with gusto. Everything was a competition to him. Ryu was his rival and he'd stop at nothing to beat him. Watching them, the old man thought of the tale of the hare and the tortoise and chuckled silently to himself.

This time the hare was first to finish. As Ryu methodically ground out his last kicks, Ken lay breathless on the ground.

'Not bad' said the old man in begrudging approval 'Ryu, fetch the rope.' As Ryu brought the length of twine from his bag the tutor explained;

'Ken, get the other end of the rope. Ryu, balance the bottle on your head and skip one hundred times. Drop the bottle and it's one hundred sit ups.'

Ken looked up in amazement 'I'd say you're kidding but I know better! '

The old man smiled and softly whispered to himself 'You're learning.

■■■■■

The sun was high when the order was given to rest. For the next hour Ken and Ryu slept soundly beneath a canvas sheet. After they woke and ate, the master spoke.

'To be champion you must control your mind and have perfect balance. I've taught you to channel the energy of Sheng Long to make the Hadoken and the Dragon Punch. Now you're ready to learn the deadly Tatsumaki Senpu Kyaku.

If your opponent is twenty paces from you, how do you attack him?'

Ken quickly replied 'I'd charge at the coward.'

Running at the enemy leaves you vulnerable to attack. A good fighter will crush you. What about you Ryu?'

Ryu thought carefully and then spoke. 'Fake the Hadoken to draw the attack and then flying kick.'

The old man smiled. 'Good answer but you're still prone to an uppercut or the mid-air throw. You could fly across twenty feet in less than a second while kicking your enemy and remaining protected against the counter.'

Both fighters looked at each and shook their heads 'How' they replied together

'Simple' said their tutor 'Tatsumaki Senpu Kyaku or as our Western friends call it, The Whirlwind-Feet-Hurricane-Kick.

This morning you learned to balance the bottle and fight, now channel your mind's power and propel yourself across space. Let's begin.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was 3am in Manhattan and the sewer smoke drifted eerily across the shadowy half-lit streets. The Hudson fog slowly enveloped the tiny figures that walked the early morning streets like ants.

There'd been another rape in Central Park, the third this week and now the night was awash with flashing lights and the piercing wail of ambulance sirens. The distorted sound of police megaphones sent garbled messages into the murky night. They were desperately trying to reassure the crowds that everything was under control but the masses we're not convinced. No-one was safe any more.

In a back alley in China town, a solitary figure dressed in combat trousers, large black overcoat and clutching a half-empty bottle to his lips, staggered and fell.

His name was Guile. He had special forces written all over him. His blond hair was cropped to a quarter-inch. His muscled body bore the scars of battle. On his right shoulder he bore the company tattoo.

He'd completed missions in El Salvador, Chile, Nicaragua, plus the countless times he'd been woken at midnight, blindfolded and shoved in the back of the plane, left to guess where *this* adventure would lead him.

The last mission was his final one. He and eight others had flown to Thailand to break out a group of government hostages.

Their helicopter was hit by enemy fire and they crashed landed in the jungle. Only him and the co-pilot, Charlie, survived. They were captured and tortured in a military camp. After many months of planning they escaped but Charlie was killed before they reached the border. Guile made it back but was shortly after diagnosed psychologically unbal-

anced and discharged. Since then he'd been trying to fit into a world which had no place for him. He was being driven insane by the guilt and anger that raged inside him.

Guile tried to pick himself up but slipped and fell, spilling the contents of his bottle. A large rat scurried across the misty cobbled streets.

He picked up the bottle and let fly, missing by five feet. 'Damn' he muttered to himself in a heavy Brooklyn drawl. The glass shattered, the sound reverberating around the alley, sending a family of hissing alley-cats fleeing into the night. In the corner, a figure stirred from a beneath pile of cardboard and let burst a volley of abuse. 'Can't ya let a man sleep!'

Guile rose to his feet, bouncing from one wall to the next. 'Don't worry Charlie. I wont let 'em get ya.'

At that moment six silhouettes appeared out of the fog like ghosts and walked slowly towards Guile. They were dressed in the uniform of the Canal Street gang — leather jackets open to the waist with the words 'Born to kill' in red letters on the back. They all branded baseball bats. The leader took a pace forward out of the mist and pointed to Guile. 'This is Canal Street turf. We own these streets. You walk down here, you gotta pay. Understand?'

Guile continued to walk straight ahead. There was a loud swish of steel through air as the leader reached to his belt and pulled out a flick-knife. The blade gleamed in the eerie light of the street lamp as he made slicing motions. The leader spoke again, this time with anger. 'Don't ignore me you punk. I said you gotta pay. Gimme all your cash or else I'll carve you into pieces.

Guile turned to face them. His eyes narrowed, his shoulders tightened and his left hand crept into a fist. Gritting his teeth, he looked the leader in the eye and slowly smiled…

CHAPTER SIX

For the twelve years since her father's death Chun Li had been thinking about his killer. The night she left Lan Pau she walked twenty three miles in a daze and sobbing before collapsing from exhaustion. She was found by a group of monks who carried her back to the temple and adopted her into their fold. They gave her school lessons in the evenings, but it was her Kung Fu lessons each morning that Chun Li grew to love.

Alone, without a family and introverted after finding that her father had been murdered, Kung Fu was all the little girl had to hang onto. She would spend hours standing in the stone courtyard, sun rays pouring through the lattice ceiling, carefully trying to perfect the complex movements and breathing patterns. With blisters from the floor, Chun Li would jump, spin, land on one leg and hold stone still until her toes turned white. Or she would sit and gaze at the wall in absolute concentration, trying to channel her energy. And every now and again Chun Li would think about her father, and shed a tear.

Her master, Xia Mon, was proud of his student and would spend hours teaching her special movements such as willing her feet to move faster than her eyes could follow. But Xia Mon worried about the intense hatred the young girl carried inside her.

'Chun Li, you must let go,' he would say to her.

'Your father is gone and to go on hating is to go on punishing your soul for something that is now out of your control.'

Chun Li would nod, and try to put the feelings out of her mind, but her thoughts kept coming back to a vision of a man and a sharp steel knife… how could she forget?

She was only a girl when she left home on that tragic March evening but since then she'd blossomed into a beautiful nineteen year-old. Chun Li enjoyed life at the temple — it had become home and she'd grown to accept the monks as her family. Her only contact with her mother was in a letter she'd sent three years ago, explaining she was safe and that she wouldn't be coming home until she avenged her father, or found the strength to forget.

It was two days before her twentieth birthday that Xia Mon called her to his retreat. Amid candles and burning incense, he sat in the middle of the floor holding something in his clenched hand.

'Chun Li, be seated my child,' he whispered.

'I have news. Brother Mia Tun has found information about your father's killers.'

Her eyes grew wide and mouth opened, but Xia Mon held up his hand.

'Your father was a good man, but stumbled onto a big drug gang and was ambushed in a warehouse. Unfortunately his fellow policemen ran, but he bravely stayed.

'After a fight he was captured and made an example of by the gang. They tied him up to a forklift and tortured him with Katanas for three hours before the leader finally killed him

'It was a horrible death, but your father did die a hero.'

Chun Li rose slowly, choking back tears. With eyes closed tightly, she turned towards the door.

'My child,' said Xia Mon.

Turning back and opening her eyes she looked at her master.

'Brother Mia Tun also brought you this.'

Xia Mon opened his hand to reveal a small silver whistle — the same one a young seven year-old girl had thrown out

her window in hatred twelve years ago.

'Master,' said a wavering voice.

'Yes, Chun Li?'

'My father's killer?'

'He was an evil man, and yes, he is still alive.'

'What was he called, Master?'

'His name, my child, is Vega.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the village, Ryu shuffled through the dusty side-streets. He took solace in his solitude. He'd always been a loner. As a child, Ryu never joined in the village children's games. After his school lessons he'd rush to the outskirts of town and watch the I-Chi monks practise their karate. He imagined himself as a fighter, travelling the world, never needing anyone. As he grew older he spent less and less time at home. Ryu wasn't interested in the boastful talk of the boys and their conquests. All his spare hours were spent learning karate from an ex-streetfighter that lived in a tumbledown shack on Mt Fujimoto.

In the mountains he felt cleansed. Life was simple. The mornings were spent hunting in the forest for deer or firewood. In the afternoons, when the sun had eased, the old man would take him fishing in the lake over the ridge. In the evenings, he'd train then they'd build a fire and Ryu would listen with wonder at the old man's stories of past Street Fighter competitions. When the old man went to bed, Ryu would roll out his blanket, gaze at the endless constellations that filled the starry sky and dream of the day he'd be crowned Street Fighter champion.

Now, at 24, he was fully versed in the art of Sheng Long. He knew he could never love, could never have family or friends. To be a champion he must live his life alone. No-one could penetrate the barriers he'd raised against the outside world.

So now, he wandered slowly, collecting his thoughts, preparing his mind and soul for the battle ahead. Amid the debris of the ramshackle village he felt calm.

■■■■■

The leader tossed his flick-knife from hand to hand, and watched the big guy in the combat gear straighten up. He'd handled worse. For two years he'd been the top dog in the Canal Street gang, and on Canal Street two years was an eternity. He'd had to take on some of the toughest and meanest around — the druggies, the bodyguards for the pimps and those who just came to try their luck. Only four weeks ago he got caught up in a cocaine battle with a gang from the other block and lost two friends. But they finally got the other leader on the ground and spent ten minutes breaking his legs in different places with baseball bats before the flick-knife finally came out.

The guy now in front of him was big, and there was something a bit different about him, but nobody disobeyed an order on Canal Street and got away with it.

'I said give me your money now, you scumbag!'

It was a raspy voice that replied: 'No way, man. You want it, you take it.'

The leader turned to the others and laughed. 'You just made your first and last mistake. I'm gonna rip your filthy disease-ridden throat out.'

With a command in Chinese the gang charged. Guile, up to now motionless, suddenly threw his rippling arms in the air and screamed like an animal. His eyes rolled back and the sky turned red as he saw the face of his mate Charlie calling for help. He pushed his fingers into his palms so hard they drew blood, he screamed a second time, and then it happened.

There was a blinding flash and a drone like the sound of a jet flying overhead. The walls shook and plaster crumbled as the intensity of the noise grew to a frenzy. Guile, eyes blazing, stood there as the gang fell to the floor writhing in pain. The one with tattoos on his face and a ring through his nose clutched his ears desperately trying to block out the



sound. There was a smash as the street light shattered, casting the alley into darkness. A wail of agony pierced the frosty night.

The gang leader's eardrums filled with blood. He felt his brains pushing against the walls of his skull, his eyes bulging out of their sockets. He screamed as his liver ruptured and his mouth flooded with the sweet taste of blood. He pushed his hands against his ears as if holding two halves of an eggshell together but it was no use. His body sagged and his hands flopped to his side as he fell like a rag doll.

■■■■■

Guile stood there, sobbing. Around him were thirteen men, two of them groaning and holding bleeding heads. The other eleven were not as lucky — the nearest was lying in a pool of blood, eyes frozen open with a look of fear and disbelief. Guile fell to his knees, picked up the limp figure and hugged him.

'Charlie, I'm sorry man. I love you. I love you, man...'

The soldier's voice echoed off down the cold street.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The flames roared high into the night sky as Ryu and the old man sat outside a bamboo hut on the fringes of Mau Lau. In the small village the rest of the Street Fighters were being wined and dined by the locals. To host the competition was a great honour for the villagers and while the competition lasted they treated the fighters like Gods. Ken revelled in the attention but Ryu preferred to spend the night before a competition in more humble surroundings.

Sitting beside the fire the shadows danced across their glowing faces, rising then falling, as if projections on a silken screen. As the icy wind blew, Ryu shivered and drew his blanket closer around his chin. He watched the fireflies gather around the open fire then dive deep into the burning inferno. He thought of all the people that would perish at the hands of their dreams, and he realised how happy he was with his life. He'd never loved, he had nothing to lose.

The old man looked deep into the glowing embers with tired eyes. Tonight he felt old and melancholy. After a long silence, he reached to the bag at his side and pulled out a bottle. ' Cold Ryusan? Here,try some of this. I was saving it but it's time I stopped living in the past. Let's drink together'

Ryu took the bottle slowly. 'Thank you, master, I'm deeply honoured.' Raising the cup to his lips he shuddered as the Sake flooded through his body. Turning to the old man he asked, 'Why do you never talk about your past?'

The old man thought for a moment 'Sometimes,' he said 'things are best left. Those days are over, Ryusan, and no matter how much I yearn for them they'll never return. Better for me to move on while I still can.'

'But you achieved so much, Street Fighter Champion three years running. You're the White Dragon, the greatest

fighter that ever lived. I'd kill to be like you.'

'My son, you're young and you've a lot to learn. There's more to life than Street Fighting.'

'Not to me. Anyway how can you say that? You've spent the last ten years teaching me to give up everything and now you say I'm missing out. It's easy for you to say that now. You've been champion, you've had your fame. I want mine.'

'I'm sorry if I disappoint you, Ryusan. There are a lot of things about me you don't know. I paid a great price for my fame. I lost the only one I ever loved.'

'I don't understand, master. You said when you swore the oath to Sheng Long you would never have room in your life for another.'

The old man bit his lip and fought back the tears that welled deep inside 'There's a lot of things you don't know about me. Promise you'll never end up the bitter old man I am.'

'What's the matter, master? I've never seen you like this before, and why are you saying all this the night before the competition?'

The old man took another drink and a tear rolled slowly down his cheek. 'Ryu, when I was young I was hungry like you. Nobody mattered, I was devoted to Sheng Long. With my success came fame. There were many girls desperate to meet Street Fighters but I met one who wasn't like the rest. Her name was Miku and we fell in love. They were wonderful days. Within six months we married, I'd never known such happiness. That year's competition was in Tokyo and she begged me to take her. She was only twenty-two and seven months pregnant. I pleaded with her to stay but she couldn't bear to be alone. I wanted to pull out of the tournament but there was so much pressure on me as the champion defending the title in my own country, I couldn't let the people down. I wasn't true to myself. I betrayed Sheng

Long.

'I sailed through the opening fights but I had too much on my mind. I was worried about Miku and the baby, I couldn't concentrate. Do you see now why you must never have feelings for anyone.

'That night, a man stopped me. He said there was a lot of money riding on my shoulders and if I won the fight tomorrow I'd never see my wife and child again. I never told Miku and I tried to forget his words, but I couldn't.

'The next afternoon I fought a tough challenger called Sagat. I knew I could beat him but I was still thinking about the threat. I tried to call off the fight, but the officials said there'd be a riot if I didn't compete. I won the first bout easily and I was sitting in my corner when a boy handed me a message repeating the threat. Looking into the crowd I saw the same evil face sitting next to Miku.

'I was confused. I lost the second round. The crowd were jeering, I wanted to hide. Sagat laughed and began to taunt me. I knew he was behind this but I was powerless to stop him. I let him hit me once, then twice. The crowd booed. I was powerless. Turning to the crowd Sagat shouted "This is your champion. See how easily I tear him apart. The days of the dragon are over. I'm the new champion." The crowd were yelling for me to fight but I couldn't take my eyes off Miku and the man sitting next to her.

'Sagat turned to me and shouted "Fight, you chicken. Show your people what you're worth." He hit me with an uppercut that knocked me to floor. He stood over me and kicked me again and again. I felt my left leg break and then my right but I didn't care. As I was about to pass out, he stopped. I heard a scream. Miku had pushed to the front of the ring and was begging to stop the contest. Sagat turned, grabbed her and threw her into the ring. They tried to stop him but he kicked them back. Laughing demonically, he

grabbed her and tried to kiss her. She screamed and kicked him with all her force. He fell to the floor, then jumped up bellowing. By the time the crowds had dragged him off, he'd broken her jaw and three ribs.

'Two days later she lost the baby. We struggled on after that but it was never the same. I gave up fighting but I could never forgive myself. I never told anyone about the threat, it burned inside me. I had failed her, cheated my people and shamed Sheng Long. Every time I looked at her the guilt burned inside me. I couldn't touch her. She said nothing but I knew. Within the year she died.

'I moved to Mount Fujimoto. I needed to be alone. I must pay my penance. That's why I beg you now, please don't fight tomorrow. You're still young, you've got time on your side. There are many other things you can do. Don't end up a lonely old man like me.'

Ryu's reply was quick and tinged with anger. 'How can you say this? Don't you believe anything you've taught me? I've dedicated my entire life and now you want me to give up because of your mistake?' Ryu's voice grew stronger. 'I was born a Street Fighter, I will always be a Street Fighter. My path has been chosen and I will follow my course.'

The old man stared deep into the fire. 'I know I've failed you, Ryusan. I've taught you everything I know, now you must continue on your own. You don't need me anymore and I can't sit and watch you ruin your life. I'm leaving for Fujimoto in the morning, you will never see me again. I have given you the truth, I have nothing left to offer. Good bye my son, I will always remember you.'

The old man slowly rolled up his blanket and moved inside. Ryu sat motionless, the tears streaming down his cheeks. He picked up a handful of earth and spread it on the dwindling fire. The last dying embers struggled for breath, then all was dark.

CHAPTER NINE

Pitch black was a more apt description for the road from Takaku to Mau Lau. Only six miles from the smaller and rural Mau Lau, Takaku had once been a trading centre for the wealthy. But the glitz had slowly been overtaken by the vices associated with money. Slick and well-kept street had become rubbish-littered ghettos, and park benches had become homes to the homeless. Takaku was a drug centre, and police were virtually powerless to stop it.

That night, a tall figure in a robe weaved his way back down the road towards Mau Lau. Vega had been to Takaku before, but tonight was one of the more successful visits. The Street Fighter-cum-drug lord always found it an easy place to offload opium, with plenty of contacts and an endless stream of addicted junkies.

Only two hours before he had been sitting in one of his favourite houses in the red light district offering free samples of his latest haul. The girls were very appreciative and Vega planned to visit after tomorrow's competition. How he loved the money and the power.

The big fighter stumbled, but regained his balance. 'Damn road,' he swore softly, before laughing. Seeing an old overturned cart on the side of the road, he made his way over and leaned up against it. Drawing a small bottle from side pocket, Vega took a sip of Sake and tried to focus on the other side of the road. It was no good — he couldn't see a thing. Tossing the bottle back down along the road, he pushed himself off the side of the cart and started towards Mau Lau.

Thirty feet back, a small figure crouched silently behind a short cane windbreak. For those close enough to see, only the whites of the eyes betrayed the presence of a human

being. Slowly, in panther-like movements, the figure rose and crept from the damp field. Two small feet stepped over the empty bottle on the road and followed the man in the robe towards the town of Mau Lau.

■■■■■

Vega was drunk and drugged. He kept telling himself he wouldn't touch the stuff again, but when it was free and there were women around he just seemed to lose his will power. Now he was regretting it.

As he rounded the corner half a mile from the small village he stumbled again and this time fell to his knees. Dizzily he pushed himself to his feet, took three steps forward and stopped. Now he was seeing things — a shadow seemed to move across the road. Shaking his head he stepped forward again.

There, there was something there, in the middle of the road. Vega moved towards it as the mist seemed to clear and the ground became lighter. Five feet away, the man in the robe stopped and the young Chinese girl blocking his way lifted her head.

■■■■■

Chun Li stood there feeling nothing. Twelve years of anger and pent-up rage had found its way onto this deserted road in the middle of Japan. She wasn't faced with some huge evil power or tyrant seeking to wage war, just a doped and drunk has-been barely able to stand. She took a step forward to see the face more clearly.

This was the man who had killed her father. This was the man who had taken away the most precious thing a happy little twelve-year-old girl owned. This was the man Chun Li

had been having nightmares about.

She surveyed the face — it was becoming old with a number of scars on it. The mouth was drawn tight and the hair black and matted. She looked into the eyes.

'You killed my father,' came the far-away whisper.

Vega straightened himself and cocked his head slightly.

'Twelve years ago you tied him up to a forklift and tortured him for three hours before killing him. You took him away from me.'

A slow smile crept onto Vega's face. He took a step forward so he could see more clearly.

'Policeman,' said Vega. 'Your father was a pig, little girl. Pigs who meddle in what I do get slaughtered.'

Chun Li trembled slightly, but held her arms by her side.

'He needed to be taught a lesson, and now it looks like his bitch of a daughter does as well. Is there any more of your family searching for me?, taunted Vega with a sneer.

Chun Li swallowed and clenched her teeth as Vega took a step forward. She prepared for an attack, but it didn't come. Instead the murderer leaned forward and spat in her face before laughing to the heavens.

Twelve years of hatred suddenly erupted inside the young Chinese girl. She flew into the air and pierced the night with a shattering scream before hammering down on Vega's right shoulder with both feet. It crunched and dislocated as she flew back into the air and landed again in front of him.

'You will die,' growled Vega holding his arm in pain. But the words didn't get a chance to reach their destination. Chun Li flew through the air and with a flip inverted her body, slamming into her father's killer with both feet. Landing, she concentrated her effort and kicked Vega five, ten, twenty times before he had recovered. Each time a different bone cracked in the killer's body.

Vega swayed and stumbled, for the last time on that cold Japanese road. Lifting his bloodied head, a look of fear crept over his face. He watched Chun Li rise off the ground and her feet swivel towards his head.

Vega closed his eyes…

CHAPTER TEN

Ryu's head was spinning. Everything the master had told him about being loyal to Sheng Long had been a lie. He felt cheated. How was he supposed to remain true if the master couldn't? For the first time in his life he began to have doubts. He'd been deserted in his hour of need. He was alone.

Ryu tried to put all the hate and anger out of his mind. He was a warrior, the fight wasn't personal. He knew pride was a Street Fighter's downfall. Get angry and you lost control, lose control and you were already beaten.

Sagat continued to taunt him. 'You're worthless. You've been taught by a failure. Come on, no tricks, face to face or are you too chicken like that teacher of yours?'

Ryu tried to clear his mind and ignore his opponent. Inside, his blood was boiling. He tried deep breaths but it was no use. Sagat, back turned, was trading insults with the crowd. Ryu couldn't resist. With a yell, he charged and launched himself at his opponent. There was an almighty crash as Ryu was thrown headlong out of the ring into the aisles. As he hit the ground he felt his ribs shatter. His head was spinning, his left eye closed completely and the vision in his right drifted in and out of focus. His white Sheng Long robe was drenched with the blood that gushed from his mouth and nose.

Sagat was above him. 'Get up! I've not finished. Come and get some more!' Ryu almost blacked out but somehow managed to drag himself to his feet.

A searing pain shot down his right side. Inside his jacket, three blood-soaked ribs protruded from his mid-riff. He felt vomit creep up his throat then stop short. Squinting, he made out the fuzzy outline of the tall gangly figure of Sagat.

Shielding his damaged left side, Ryu winced as he threw a few flimsy jabs. Sagat, laughing, contemptuously, strode towards Ryu and kicked him to the ground.

The action seemed to go into slow motion. It was as if Ryu left his body and was watching from above. He saw the kicks coming but there was nothing he could do to stop them. His ears rang with the cries of the crowds. Ryu's world went dark.

In the front row a small man in a sweat- stained linen suit called the odds '3-1 he doesn't make the count' but there were no takers. 'Come on 5-1, who wants some action?' A middle-aged woman stood screaming on her chair 'Go on! Kick him again, in the head! That's it, now in the face. Kill him!'

At the back of the arena a small stooped figure wrestled with the heavy doors. The guards blocked his way then raised their hats and showed him through. A whisper started through the crowd as heads turned to the man scurrying towards the ring. Fight fans recognised him as The White Dragon.

Ryu lay unconscious in the sweltering heat. Beside him lay a pool of blood and teeth. On the other side of the ring, Sagat grabbed a young village woman by the hair. He was taunting the crowd when the old man struggled through the last jeering onlookers to his pupil on the ground.

Bending down, he took Ryu's battered head in his hands and spoke:

'Ryusan, I've come to make my peace. Forgive me, I'm a bitter old man with nothing to live for. As my life draws to a close, so yours beckons in front of you. You are the future, let us part as friends.'

The White Dragon looked down at his battered pupil, unmoving and heavy in his hands. Ryu's breathing grew heavy, his eyes opened and he whispered 'One thing I must



know. Do you still believe in Sheng Long?'

The reply was quick and from the heart: 'Yes, my son. I do.'

Suddenly the crowd grew louder, and The White Dragon turned to see the huge figure of Sagat standing behind him, sneering. Rising slowly to his feet, the old man lifted his head and stared straight into the eyes of the one who had ruined his life all those years ago.

'I told you next time I saw you, I would kill you,' Sagat bellowed down. 'You should not have come old man — you should have stayed content with your worthless, useless life. Now you die!'

With a mighty laugh Sagat lifted the trembling figure of The White Dragon by the throat and threw him into a wall. Striding over, he picked up the crumpled and winded body, lifted it one foot, two, three into the air, pinned it against the wall and drew back a huge fist.

In a pause that seemed to stretch for minutes, the old man gently opened his eyes, listened to the crowd hush and said to his tormentor: 'You can do nothing more to me, Sagat — my soul will live no matter what you do, and so will Ryu's. Yours died long ago…'

Mercilessly, Sagat threw back his head and laughed once more, the sun glinting off his sweat-drenched pectoral muscles. His huge arm drew higher and higher, rippling and like a sledgehammer waiting for the order to fall. The fist tightened into a ball, and the smile left his face. The old man looked across the ring to his pupil and awaited the inevitable.

Ryu, seared with pain, groaned and pulled himself onto one arm with all his remaining strength. Looking across the ring he saw the two of them — the evil Sagat about to deliver the final blow, and his master looking straight at him. The scene froze in slow motion as their eyes met. Then it explod-

ed.

'NO!' screamed Ryu as the huge fist of Sagat descended, slicing into the old man's larynx and crushing his throat. The crowd surged forward as Ryu watched his master's body rise into the air and then float back onto a table, crashing into the dust. 'NO! NO!' screamed Ryu. 'NO!'

Sagat turned, surprised that his opponent had come back to life. He snarled, drew himself up to full height, and prepared to strike.

■■■■■

The crowd gasped but Ryu stood motionless. He reached within the very depths of his soul for the ancient powers of his forefathers. Clearing all thoughts from his mind, the energy surged through his veins like flood waters bursting a dam. His body trembled as he struggled to control the power that raged within him. Ryu rose into the air as if plucked from the skies by the dragon himself. There was a rush of wind and a scream of 'Shor-yu-ken.' The arena echoed as the two bodies collided. There was the loud crack of broken bones and then silence.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The wind gusted strongly from the south sending murky clouds sweeping across the overcast hills. The sky loomed dark and ominous as the thunder rumbled overhead. In the fields the cattle lay low against the weathered wall, huddled together to shield from the coming storm. The fishing boats rocked in the harbour like matchstick models as the waves crashed onto the craggy rocks.

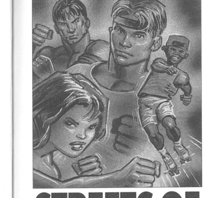
On a deserted hilltop at the foot of Mount Fujimoto, Ryu laid the old man's body to rest. It was as he would have wished. He had no family and few friends. His possessions fitted into a small carpet bag and were buried alongside him.

Sitting beside the small mound Ryu thought back over his life with the old man. Now he was truly alone. As his mind pondered on the many hours they spent together, the heavens opened and the skies rained. Ryu stood up and opened his arms, lifting his face to feel the cool beads of water run down his cheeks. As the rain poured down upon him, he felt cleansed.

He looked to the East upon the tiny village and the frantic scurrying as wives desperately dragged in washing and husbands moored their boats. He turned and walked boldly towards the West. A flock of gulls were caught on the wing and buffeted into shore. Their screams filled the silent hills but Ryu never looked back.

As his last footsteps faded, into the shadowy mist that enveloped the hills, there was one last cry then he was gone.

The End



STREETS OF RAGE II

By Mat Yeo

Thanx to: Stu, the Sega Force posse, Rowntree's Walnut Whips, Sega Europe, Yuzo Koshiro, the 'Mef, and of course, Axel, Adam, Max, Blaze and Skate!

PROLOGUE

From the shadows, the man watched intensely. He'd been keeping a close eye on the heroes for weeks now, yet this was the first time he'd seen them up close. The darkness hid him from prying eyes as he chuckled at the spectacle that unfolded before him. His so-called 'superior', Mr Big, was getting a first-hand taste of justice.

The man could clearly see the large-suited thug staggering around with an automatic rifle firmly gripped in both hands. The ruthless individual known as Mr Big let out a cry and sprayed the room with lethal lead. A few stray bullets richocheted near the crouched figure yet he didn't flinch. He was safe in his hiding place — all he had to do was wait patiently. The next few minutes would decide his fate and that of the criminal madman.

For too long, Mr Big had held the city in the grip of a violent crime wave. Fate was about to play a cruel hand to the brutal villain.

In the spacious board room stood three striking figures. Each was the epitome of physical perfection. They were muscular, tall and a glint of determination shone in their eyes. They were on a crusade that would determine the fate of every man, woman and child in the city. If they couldn't stop the rampage of Mr Big's organisation, the sprawling metropolis would fall prey to evil for decades to come. Only by standing up against the corrupt government and taking on the criminal element on their own ground could the crusaders hope to save their city.

Destiny was calling and history was about to be made. The three heroic figures had defeated all the opposition thrown at them. All that remained was for Mr Big to be toppled. He was currently surrounded and down to his last round of ammunition.

A twisted smile crossed his lips. He thought victory would be his. He had never lost a fight before and three young upstarts meant nothing to him. One quick burst of fire and it would be over.

The shrouded figure watched in awe as the two men and auburn-haired woman moved ever-closer to the suited criminal then leapt toward him. Mr Big managed to get off one quick blast of fire. It struck the wall.

Before he could aim again, he was brought to his knees by a powerful punch to the mid-section from the dark-skinned man. As he doubled up in agony, the woman lashed out with a lightning-fast kick. The kick connected with Mr Big's head and there was an almighty cracking noise. He slumped forward to land in a crumpled heap on the floor.

As blood began to trickle from his nose, the vengeful figures towered above the figure in silent victory.

The blond-haired man spoke.

'It's over,' he whispered.

The curtains were drawn back and bright sunlight spilled into the room. Standing by the window, the courageous champions stared out at the new day dawning. After a few minutes, they turned and left the room. Their mission was over and for the first time in years, the city could sleep soundly.

As silence descended on the room, a section of wall slid open. From the confines of a secret room, a tall

man appeared. He quickly surveyed the damage and gazed at the body before him.

Moving casually forward, he knelt down and touched the bloody head. Mr Big was dead and his organisation lay in ruins. Almost.

The man turned to the window and placed a blood-stained hand on the glass. Before him lay a city still dazed by the violence of the past few days. The criminal underworld was as confused as the rest of the population. Who would lead them? Could anyone lead them?

The stranger smiled to himself as he recalled the words of the blond-haired man who had rid the city of an evil mastermind. He stared at the skyline and spoke to himself.

'Over?' he whispered coldly. 'It's never over. In fact, it's only just begun!'

He closed the curtains and once again the room was plunged into darkness. One day soon, the city would once again suffer the same fate.

CHAPTER ONE

Five years later...

The sun was beginning to rise as the merchant ship floated into the city harbour. It was a massive vessel that had travelled the oceans a lot longer than its designers intended. It was scarred by years of sailing in harsh weather and barnacles formed a second skin on its weathered hulk.

Inside the floating wreck were packing crates bound for various far-flung destinations. Boxes that contained spices and silks from the Far East, jewellery from Hong Kong and 'special items' for desperate customers.

The ship was emerging from a fog bank a mile from the ports in the east of the city. Its main wooden deck was dark green and soaked with salt water. A fine mist floated over the deck as two figures emerged from one of the cabins.

The first man was a small Oriental who scurried to and fro with bucket and mop in hand. His task was to clean the ship before the captain awoke or suffer the wrath of a drunken old mariner. His pay was pitiful but he went about his job cheerily, singing a strange Oriental song.

The other man was no stranger to these parts. This was his home. At least, it *had* been. But as the ship neared the shore, the past few years melted away and the man smiled at the pleasant and not-so pleasant memories that drifted across his mind.

He wandered to a side rail and gripped it with both hands. He was a young man with a face that had grown old before its time. His thick blond hair spilled

over his eyes and a bushy beard surrounded his jaw. Beneath his long coat, iron-hard muscles flexed.

The man was obviously trained to be tough and this had served him well in his long journey. The hardened crew had learned to stay well away from the stranger after an incident early in the voyage. One of the seamen had attempted to help himself to the man's wallet. The crew member had to suffer the rest of the journey with a fractured arm and two broken ribs.

To those who knew him, the man was simply called Axel. This was the first time he'd set eyes on the city for nearly four years. The bitter memory of his leaving washed over him. It had not been pleasant. He had seen his friends turn against him, the city's people hate him and finally his self-enforced exile from the metropolis.

But he had finally come to terms with the misery he had been forced to endure. This homecoming was a way of healing old wounds.

The ship slid silently alongside a deserted jetty and sailors appeared on deck to secure the mighty vessel. Thick coiled ropes were slung over the sides and quickly fastened to moorings. There would be much to do before the crew and cargo would be allowed to pass through customs and into the sprawling land of America.

As the crew went about their tasks, Axel picked up his rucksack and simple belongings. Hoisting the sack onto his shoulder, he moved away from the hand rail and walked toward the edge of the ship nearest the jetty. Staring down from the deck, he could see customs officers and officials emerging from offices dotted

along the shore line.

The jetty was about 30 feet below. Axel took one step and heard a voice behind him.

'Hey pal, stay away from the edge. You'll...'

The sentence trailed away as Axel moved forward and narrowed his eyes. Stepping off the ship, he plummeted and landed nimbly on his feet. Standing up, he surveyed the people around him. Most had blank expressions from what they'd just witnessed. Whispers came floating down from the crew.

'Madre dios! Did you see that?' said one of the sailors.

The jump would be impossible for an ordinary man. But this was no ordinary man. The murmurs died down and a man wearing a United States customs uniform approached Axel nervously.

'Sir, I'm afraid you'll have to wait onboard until we've finished checking the vessel. No immigrants are allowed on shore until...' His voice trailed away as Axel fished in his coat pockets and produced a battered brown leather book. The customs officer took the object and slowly opened it.

Axel stood patiently as the man in the suit read the document. The passport was handed back and a frightened grin appeared on the man's face.

'Ah... er... I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realise it was you. Er... what I mean to say is, we usually have to check any foreign passengers landing here. Seeing as you're an American citizen and all... I, er... Welcome to...'

The man jabbered on in garbled bursts as Axel collected his stuff and strode toward the streets. He turned around the corner of a building and was gone.

Two more customs men rushed over to the shaking figure. One of them spoke.

'Hey, Bob, just who the hell was that anyway?'

Bob stared at where the blond-haired man had been and spoke in a whisper.

'You're not gonna believe who that was. It's incredible. I haven't seen that guy's face for years. Where the hell has he been?'

The other man spoke.

'So who was it, Bob? You look like you've seen a ghost!'

The customs officer took of his cap and wiped the beads of sweat from his brow. He turned to his colleagues and stared at them, white-faced.

'I think I just have.'

■■■■■

As he entered the nearest main street, Axel hailed a cab. The familiar sight of a yellow car weaving through traffic brought a brief smile to his lips. Maybe he hadn't been wrong in coming home.

The decision had been difficult but necessary. He'd spent too long away from his native country. The time to return was now. He couldn't hide from the past forever. Only by facing his problems could he come to terms with what had happened.

The taxi cab screeched to halt within feet of Axel. The door was flung open by the driver, who grinned a toothy grin from the front seat.

'Hop in, pal. This is your lucky day. The name's Mick O'Connel, the fastest driver in the city. If your

going somewhere, I can get you there faster than you can say "Mother Theresa"!'

Axel smiled at the man and threw his rucksack into the cab's interior, following a split second later. Before the door even closed, the vehicle pulled away from the curb and into the early morning traffic. Unexpectedly thrown back into his seat, Axel struggled to regain his balance.

He leant forward and called out to the cabby.

'Hey, how's about getting us there in one piece. I wasn't planning to come home in a box! Head for the lower-east side.'

The driver laughed. 'Yeah, my apologies, pal. In this burg you gotta be on your toes when it comes to picking up customers. There ain't as many of them as there used to be. Times are hard and we're having to get tough. It's a war zone out there!'

Axel sat back and stared out of the window at the passing buildings. A war zone? If any one should know about war zones, it was Axel. The city streets were still dark and foreboding but the memory of a city at war was something he would sooner forget. It only seemed like yesterday that he...

Axel was jarred back to his senses by the red lights ahead and the taxi ploughing straight through them. He shouted to the maniacal driver: 'Hey, didn't you see that light?'

The cabby leant back, taking his eyes off the road for far too long.

'What light?'

Axel groaned and put his hand over his eyes. He hadn't been back in the city for long and already he

was in danger of ending up a John Doe in the city morgue, thanks to 'Driver Death' up front!

As the cab approached the lights of the lower-east side, Axel looked at the empty streets. Something bothered him. This neighbourhood had always been tough but you were sure to see market stalls set up and street hawkers plying their trade. Even at this early hour, there *should* have been people making their way to work.

Instead, the streets were empty. There was an uncomfortable silence. The hairs stood up on the back of Axel's neck. There was something not quite right. Before he could observe more, the loud-mouthed cabby bawled at him.

'So, pal, are you gonna tell me where we're headed or do I have to guess?'

Axel reached into his coat pocket and fumbled for a piece of paper. He grabbed the crumpled scrap and unfolded it. There was an address on it and a familiar name.

'Do you know where the Adam's gym is?' he said.

The driver frowned.

'Sure I do. But why'd ya wanna go there? That place has been closed for the last eight months.'

Axel frowned. He hadn't expected this. Why was the gym closed? Could anything have happened to... No, he was panicking too easily. There had to be a simple explanation. The only way he'd find out would be to check it out for himself.

The cab finally reached its destination and screeched to halt, knocking over a couple of garbage cans. Axel grabbed his gear and pushed open the door. The driver

stuck his hand out of the window and spoke.

'That'll be six bucks, pal — plus tip.'

Axel gave him the last of his money. The hand was withdrawn into the taxi to be replaced by a frowning head.

'Listen, pal. I hope you find what you want here — and quickly. This neighbourhood ain't what it used to be. Get indoors and don't go out at night. If you're smart, you'll use your head and maybe stay alive long enough to get outta here!'

The vehicle moved off sharply and merged with the passing traffic. Axel watched the yellow cab weave expertly through lines of cars. When it had vanished, he hauled his rucksack onto his shoulder and looked up at the old building in front of him.

There was no turning back now. He had to face the past if he was going to get on with his future.

CHAPTER TWO

The gym had not stood the test of time well. Axel's last visit, about four years earlier, had ended in a violent argument between himself and an old friend, Adam.

They hadn't spoken to each other since and the rift was painful to bear. Axel and Adam had grown up together on the lower-east side. They lived next door to each other. Adam's mother had become more important to Axel then his own.

Growing up in this neighbourhood had taught the two young men to be tough but fair. It was the only way to survive. As children, they were in a street gang, The Ravens, that was both respected and feared.

When younger, violent gangs had entered the area, the Ravens were always there to protect the local people and show the punks that their friends and family weren't going to stand for any trouble. Even the police had a grudging respect for the young streetfighters and often commended them on their actions.

As time passed, the gang dissolved and both Axel and Adam entered the city's police academy, to graduate with the highest honours ever recorded. They were inseparable and division captains often requested that the pair be transferred to their department.

Their popularity and respect eventually earned them a place on a special police task force whose job was to infiltrate street gangs and break them up from the inside. Having such a tough childhood meant Axel and Adam were more than qualified for the task.

For more than five years, they brought down drug barons, murderers and psychopaths. Unfortunately, a

man can't fight evil for long without making enemies.

The summer of 1988 had seen an increase in every kind of crime, from pickpocketing right up to serial killing. At first, the police were baffled by the phenomenal rise, then they realised there could only be one explanation. Someone or some organisation was coordinating the crime wave.

As the weeks passed, crimes increased in frequency and intensity. The police were seemingly powerless to stop the unknown gang. The word on the street was that a mysterious man known only as Mr Big had risen from a petty hoodlum to a fully-fledged crime boss of incredible power. His men had sworn a blood oath to die for him and seemed to number in their thousands.

For months, all kinds of thieves, criminals and madmen had left prison or vanished from the streets. They would turn up later as trained killers serving Mr Big's crime cartel.

The city's people lived in terror and their law enforcement departments could do nothing about it. The only man that stood up to the gangs was the courageous mayor, George Rush.

The young man had constantly championed the cause of justice and his fast accession to the mayor's office had caused his political opponents to speculate how the upstart could reach such a position so quickly. He brushed aside gossip and soon became the most popular mayor in the city's history by openly and publicly denouncing Mr Big and his cohorts. Everyone loved Mayor Rush and was confident his hard-hitting campaign would bring the crime wave to a halt.

When the mayor's body was found dumped on the

city hall steps, there was a huge public outcry. How could this happen? Why weren't the police doing something about it?

The situation was deemed so serious that the President was informed and news of the corruption and violence in the city spread throughout Washington DC. To calm the public's fears, the President sent CIA task forces to the city in an attempt to dissolve the crime wave. The agents that made it off the streets alive told of a bloodthirsty, fanatical, unstoppable organisation.

This news triggered actions the President had hoped to avoid. The city was immediately placed under a state of martial law. The national guard were called in to clear up the streets. What happened next escalated the violence to unprecedented levels.

Mr Big ordered that the island city be given to him to use as he saw fit. Washington rejected his request but soon regretted it as the crime boss rounded up the city's inhabitants and forced them into slave labour groups. The national guard were sent in only to be attacked by thugs armed with heavy firepower and chemical weapons.

The city's bridges were destroyed to stop the army from entering by road and Mr Big stated that any attempt to rescue its people would result in their death. An airborne assault was ruled out as it would cause immense property damage and loss of innocent lives.

The government needed someone who knew the dangerous streets and could take on Mr Big on his home territory. That's where Axel and Adam came in.

They'd already been working their way into the criminal organisation when they were contacted by the CIA. They immediately agreed to participate in the treacherous mission and were accompanied by a female government agent, Blaze Fielding. Together the courageous trio took on the might of Mr Big and won.

They had stood together in an apartment building five years ago and ended the reign of terror that had plagued the city for so long. Mr Big had died and his criminal empire perished with him.

The next few months flashed by for the heroic crime fighters. They were hailed as media stars and awarded every honour the government could bestow. They regularly appeared on television and the names Axel, Adam and Blaze were on the lips of every free person in the country.

But things quickly turned sour. When the media hype died down, the vultures began to hover. The heroes were sued for property damage and almost every criminal in the city tried to prosecute them for assault and grievous bodily harm.

Eventually, the madness subsided and the city went about its business as if nothing had happened. The three young fighters were left with virtually nothing.

But their troubles didn't end there. Both Axel and Adam had fallen hopelessly in love with Blaze and, unable to choose between them, she left to start a new life in Washington. There was a terrible rift between the childhood friends that could not be healed.

Using money left to him by his father, Adam set up a gym in the lower-east side to train young kids how to look after themselves on the streets. It was here that

problems reached boiling point. Axel and Adam attacked each other in a fit of rage. They hadn't spoken since.

Axel left the country and headed for the Far East. The city was no longer his home and he'd lost everything he ever loved.

Four years later, Axel had come to terms with what had happened. He hoped to see his friend again and right what had gone so terribly wrong those years ago.

Little did he know he was to be embroiled in a city-wide battle for freedom… with his friend's life at stake.

CHAPTER THREE

The door of the gym was firmly locked but soon gave way with a well-aimed shoulder charge. Light spilled into the room as Axel cautiously entered the old building. Axel fumbled for a light switch and flicked it on. Half of the lights in the room came on, others stubbornly stayed dark.

The gym was dusty and obviously hadn't been cleaned for months. It was about 80 square feet in area and had a boxing ring in the centre. The walls were lined with training equipment and weights that lay where they'd last been used. Axel dropped his bag and walked toward the boxing ring.

This was the place where he and Adam had rowed and fought for the affections of a woman they both loved. Grabbing the ropes, he hauled himself up and into the ring. Above him swung the microphone that once announced fighters. He pushed the device and it swayed gently from side to side.

Just then he heard a noise from a darkened corner. He turned sharply and peered into the blackness. He could make out the shape of a man standing against a battered punch bag.

'Who's there?' he called out.

The man in the shadows moved forward and Axel could see he was not alone. There were another four men in the room. The first moved into the light and stared up at Axel.

The man was wearing scruffy jeans, a white T-shirt and a battered red leather jacket. His arms were heavily tattooed and his hair was bleached and shaved at

the sides. His eyes narrowed as he observed Axel. A manic grin spread across his face as he called to the other figures. They emerged from the darkness, similarly dressed, brandishing hunting knives and clubs.

Axel tensed and flexed his muscles. He knew there was going to be trouble and the odds were stacked against him. The gang advanced and their leader spoke.

'Whatchoo doin', man?' he snarled. 'This is our place and you ain't welcome here!' As he spoke, he pulled back his coat to reveal a number of ninja throwing stars attached to the lining.

Axel grinned.

'You wanna be careful with those toys,' he said, 'you boys are liable to hurt yourselves.'

The youth's smile faded as he grabbed one of the shiny objects and raised his hand above his head.

'The only one who's gonna be hurtin' round here is you, man!' he screamed and threw the piece of metal at Axel.

Axel stayed perfectly still and let his training take over. Time seemed to slow down to him and the blurred object floated almost motionless. He reached forward and grasped the shuriken in his hand, span round and launched the star back at the thug.

Time returned to speed and before he could move, the punk fell to his knees, the throwing star embedded in his skull. These events happened within a matter of seconds and the other gang members stood motionless as their leader lay dead on the floor.

They soon realised what had happened and ran toward Axel, their faces filled with anger. They

reached the boxing ring and two of them leapt over the ropes to land on either side of the blond-haired man.

They jumped at him with knives in their hands. Axel ducked and his foot shot out to catch one of the punks in the stomach. The thug hit the ground almost as fast as he'd left it.

The second guy landed on Axel and sent him sprawling to the canvas. Axel lashed out with his right fist, breaking his opponent's nose and spilling blood onto the dusty floor. The punk staggered backwards and fell over the ropes.

The other two leapt into the ring and Axel was surrounded once more. They moved in closely as he looked up and grabbed the microphone. He swung it straight at the thug on his left and it smashed into the club-wielder's face with a satisfying crunch.

The other punk leapt at Axel with his knife. He side-stepped the youth and watched the knife land squarely in his friend's chest. The body hit the floor, twitched once and stayed there.

Before he realised what had happened, the guy with the knife found himself on the end of Axel's fist. His jaw cracked with the impact and he too fell to the ground, unconscious.

Partly recovered, the first two gang members charged at Axel and sent him sprawling out of the ring. He landed flat on his back and winced at the sharp pain that travelled up his spine.

The two thugs landed near him and started to kick at the figure on the floor. He back-flipped onto his feet and blocked one of the kicks before a punch to the kidneys brought him to his knees.

Axel tried to defend himself by lashing out but failed to connect. Instead, he struck the wall and felt one of his fingers fracture. The pain to his head and ribs became unbearable and he felt his consciousness start to slip away.

Just as he passed out, the beating stopped and he was vaguely aware of a large shape looming over him. The shape moved silently and quickly across the room and raised its fists. Through bloody ears, he dimly heard the screams of the two punks… and then silence as everything went black.

CHAPTER FOUR

A few hours later, Axel woke from his catatonic state and sat bolt upright. His head was pounding and his chest ached.

Clutching his head, he surveyed his surroundings. He'd obviously been moved from the gym, but to where? He was lying on a comfortable mattress that lay on the floor of an old apartment building. From where he lay, he could see out of the window onto the street below. He could tell he was still in the lower-east side, due to the familiar smell of the polluted river, but his exact location was a mystery.

He propped himself up on his elbows and looked around the room. The wallpaper was peeling and there was a large hole in the ceiling that had been covered with a sheet of tarpaulin. His rucksack was by the side of his bed, apparently untouched, and his coat was hanging on the back of the door, at the foot of the bed.

The door slowly opened. Silently, Axel got to his feet. Although still groggy, he reached the wall by the door. He clenched his fists, waited until the person entered the room then moved toward the unknown figure.

He stopped short when he recognised the boy.

'Skate? Is that you?' he said.

The dark-skinned boy turned around and flashed a bright smile at the blond-haired man.

'How are ya feelin', Axel?' he said, while placing the tray of food he was carrying on the edge of the bed. Axel picked up the lad to give him a hug.

'Ha ha! You were knee-high to a bullfrog the last time I saw you and look at you now!' he grinned. 'You've grown up to be a real man. I never knew you had it in you!'

'Hey Axel, quit clowning around! We don't go in for that male bonding stuff here, ya now!'

Axel let the kid drop to his feet. At least, they *should* have been his feet. Skate earned his nickname at an early age due to the fact he always wore rollerskates. He even went to sleep with them on!

Skate was now wearing the latest rollerblade boots, a bright red baseball cap backwards on his head, red surfing shorts and a black T-shirt with the word 'Freedom' emblazoned across the front.

Skidding to a halt near the bed, he sat down. Axel sat next to him.

'So how have you been, kid? Is Adam here? Why's the gym closed…?'

Skate waved his hands. 'Slow down, bro'! There's been so much going on. I just don't know where to begin. For a start, we've been trying to get in touch with you for months. It's Adam, you see — he's been kidnapped!'

Axel couldn't believe it. Who could abduct Adam? His old friend was one of the toughest streetfighters he'd ever known. How could this have happened?

'How long's he been missing, Skate?' he said with a pained expression.

'About nine months now. He was due at the gym one day to open up and he never arrived. No one's seen or heard from him since. I… I don't know what to do.'

Axel's shoulders slumped.

'I'm sorry, kid. I've been away in the East. Wasn't even sure I was going to return. I guess I've been so wrapped up in my own problems that I didn't think to check up on you guys. Besides, Adam and I didn't exactly part on the best of terms, y'know.'

Skate looked at him. 'After you left, Adam was never the same. You guys were pals from way back. Why did you leave anyway? Was it that broad?'

Axel smiled. 'Not exactly. I guess we were just too young and hot-headed. Just like you, I s'pose!'

'Hey, watch your mouth!' laughed Skate.

The door creaked open again and Axel stopped laughing as a huge man strolled into the room, the door barely wide enough to let him pass. He was nearly seven foot tall and built like a tank! Massive muscles bulged across his chest and arms. His fists were gigantic.

Axel noticed the man had a deep scar running from the top of his scalp to just beneath his left eye. He reached up with his hand and scratched his head through thick black hair.

'Who's this, then?' said Axel, warily.

The brightly-dressed teenager stood up and skated over to the man-mountain.

'Axel, meet Max Thunder! Ex-wrestler and the guy you've got to thank for saving your ass back at the gym!'

Axel stood up and walked over to the big man, hand outstretched. Max smiled and gripped the hand tightly. Too tightly for Axel! He winced and let go.

'How ya feelin'?' said Max.

Axel rubbed his aching hand. 'I'm okay, thanks. I

owe you one. Say, were you *the* Max Thunder, who won the 1985 World Wrestling Championships?'

Max grinned. 'I sure was. I thought I was the only one who remembered that. I lost the title two years later and turned to drink, ended up on the streets.

'That's where I met Adam. He got me sober and working in his gym, training kids. When he disappeared, I had nowhere to stay so Skate let me live in the basement here.'

Axel sat back on the bed and put his head into his hands. He had a pounding headache and the news wasn't helping much.

'You okay?' asked Skate.

Axel got to his feet and straightened his shoulders. 'I will be. Once we've found Adam.'

CHAPTER FIVE

This magnificent city was a sprawling concrete jungle that housed over six million people. All of whom were potential victims. Weak prey for strong criminals to feed on.

At the town's centre was a tall steel and glass building. It had a violent and bloody history and would have again in the days to come. From the top floor, you could see both sides of the island the city was built on. The docks, the mainland and every tombstone-like skyscraper could be viewed by whoever was fortunate enough to live there.

The man who lived there was known only to his colleagues as Mr X.

He was a tall man in his late thirties, with jet black hair greying at the sides. When asked about his business dealings, he muttered something like 'property development' or 'security services'. In reality, it was far worse. Like his predecessor, Mr Big, X was the head of the most powerful criminal organisation in America — possibly the world.

However, unlike Mr Big, he did not announce the fact, or take on the city or government. No, his way was far more subtle. Mr X's influence was like a minor infection. It started as an annoyance, but if left untreated, would spread and become highly infectious.

He now had people in city hall working for him, governors, politicians and police officers. He didn't have to shout and scream to make his presence felt. Careful manipulation of the criminal element had provided him with efficient staff and a powerful private

army. The best of it was that nobody knew. Except for his closest lieutenants, of course.

Today, they were assembled around the table in his private board room. The men wore identical black suits and even appeared to have the same features.

The only man in the room who stood out was Mr X himself. He was seated at the head of the table, wearing an expensive grey suit that matched his cold, grey eyes. He stared intently as his staff informed him of the latest crime figures.

'Sir, our munitions factory has increased its turnover by 200% this past year and they expect it to keep rising,' said a man near the end of the table.

Mr X leant forward.

'Excellent, Mr Orange. Keep up the good work... As you can see, gentlemen, this organisation of mine is making an annual profit of nearly 12 billion dollars. That's what I call hard work!'

He grinned an evil grin that sent shivers down the spines of all the assembled men.

He pushed his chair back and strode to the window. He stood there for a few moments then his thoughts were interrupted by another of his officials.

'Ah... sir,' said a meek voice from the end of the room.

Mr X swivelled round on his heel and looked in the direction of the voice.

'Yes? What is it Mr Brown?'

The small, mousey-haired man coughed then continued. 'Sir... we, ah... We've had a report from one of our street gangs that I think you should know about. They were on a routine patrol of the lower east side

when they saw an unidentified man entering Adam's gym.

'They followed him in and when questioned, he became violent. He attacked our operatives and made his escape with the help of an ex-wrestler called Max Thunder. Only one of our agents made it out alive.'

Mr X frowned. 'Did he identify this stranger?'

Mr Brown frowned even harder. 'Sir, I... Sir, it was Axel!'

The room was deathly silent. Mr X sat back in his chair and swivelled it around to face the window.

After a few minutes he spoke.

'Mr Brown, find out who has heard about this and await the kill order. They must be eliminated. Then alert all our operatives city-wide and tell Shiva to stand by. He's about to earn his pay.

'Gentlemen, you are dismissed.'

The men quickly gathered their papers and briefcases and shuffled out of the huge double doors at the far side of the room. Mr X stayed where he was, deep in thought.

Eventually, he stood up and walked to the window, placing his hands firmly on the glass. He spoke silently to himself. His breath hissed through his teeth.

'So Axel, it begins again. For the last time!'

CHAPTER SIX

After an afternoon's sleep, Axel awoke and dressed ready for the night's activities. He wore torn denim jeans, a white vest and combat boots. His hair was washed and partly obscured by a tight blue headband. He'd shaved away twelve days' stubble and was wide awake.

He slid on battered red leather gloves and made a fist. There was going to be trouble but he was ready for it.

The door opened and Skate entered.

'Are ya nearly ready, Axel?' he said. He too was ready for action and had replaced his T-shirt with a familiar yellow vest. Axel looked at it and frowned.

'Hey, didn't that used to belong to Adam?' he said.

Skate stared down at the floor. 'Yeah, it's the one he wore all the time when you guys used to hang around together.'

Max arrived, dressed in a strange pair of lycra leggings. They were bright blue with yellow thunder flashes across them. On his feet were tightly-laced red boots. Axel couldn't help but laugh.

'Ha! What the hell are those things?!'

Max blushed slightly and grunted. 'They're my old wrestling clothes. I thought I'd bring them out of retirement for tonight. Just like me, I guess.'

Axel looked at Skate. 'Kid, tonight's gonna be rough. I don't wanna have to ask you to go.'

Skate spun around and sped out of the door. He yelled back down the corridor to the two men.

'C'mon, guys — let's kick ass!'

They made their way through the back streets and alleyways, dodging police patrols as they went. Their destination was Barbon's Bar, near the docks. It was a notorious hide-out for all sorts of criminals; a good place to find news on the disappearance of Adam.

They reached the bar around midnight to find it packed to overflowing. The neon sign outside flashed, illuminating the faces of the three men. Skate quickly checked the building and found a service entrance that led in from a pier.

They positioned themselves by the door and waited for the signal from Axel. He gave them the thumbs-up and they burst in.

The patrons were stunned. They may have been hardened criminals but the sight of the three figures made them stop and stare. In the corner, a jukebox wailed away. Max grabbed a chair and hurled it at the machine. With a satisfying crash, it fell as silent as the patrons.

From behind the bar, a tall man with a black moustache spoke. 'What do you want?' he said, gruffly.

Axel answered him without looking in his direction. 'We're looking for Barbon. Is he here?'

The barman spoke again. 'I'm Barbon. Who wants to know?'

Max and Skate kept their eyes firmly fixed on the people in the bar as Axel approached him. The man behind the bar was taller and wider than Axel. He was clearly a fighter.

Axel stared Barbon in the eyes and spoke.

'The name's Axel. Ring any bells?'

Barbon looked momentarily shocked and a murmur went around the room. They knew who Axel was and

many of them had scores to settle. Barbon pressed a hidden button beneath the bar.

'Sure I recognise you. What do you want?'

'I'm looking for Adam. Where is he?'

As Axel spoke to the tall barman, Max kept watch over the rabble. As he scanned the crowd for trouble, one of the attractive waitresses caught his eye. She smiled and nodded her head at him. For a moment, he relaxed and smiled back. As he did so, the waitress reached behind her.

Before he knew what had happened, a bullwhip lashed across the room and struck his arm, causing a large welt to appear. He winced and snarled back at the woman, who was laughing loudly.

Barbon barked an order and the room seemed to explode.

'Get them!' he shouted.

Everything happened at once.

Chairs flew over Skate's head to crash against the wall behind him. He skated forward, straight into a crowd of thugs. One of the men sneered down at the boy.

'Come 'ere, pipsqueak!' he cried, and tried to grab the youth.

Skate skidded beneath the man's clutches and kicked him in the backside so that he collided with the other punks. He smiled and skated off, only to encounter another group. This time he dived to the floor and span on his back, using his rollerblades to smash into the punks.

Meanwhile, Max was busy fighting the waitress, known to the locals as Electra. She was using a special



electrified whip to keep the ex-wrestler at a distance. Max couldn't get anywhere near her.

Electra cackled again and recoiled her whip for another hit. This time Max moved quickly out of the way and the lethal weapon hit the battered jukebox instead, connecting with a power cable. The overload caused the whip to explode and took Electra with it.

Axel had his hands full with the rest of the bar's rough customers. He punched and kicked his way through the crowd until he came to a halt in front of Barbon. The man towered above him and sneered.

'I'm gonna break you, boy!' he said, and swung a powerful fist at Axel's head. Axel ducked and struck Barbon in the chest. He stumbled backwards into the bar. Axel moved toward him but was fended off by a sharp kick to the head. A cut above his eyebrow started to bleed.

He had no time to waste. He had to use the new fighting techniques he'd studied in the Far East. Before he could do anything, though, he found himself picked up by Barbon and carried straight through one of the walls!

They came to a crashing halt in a pile of garbage cans outside. Heavy rain was falling. The two men were soaked to the skin in seconds.

Axel approached Barbon and took a swing at his head with a garbage can lid. The big man's head span round but he just turned back and smiled.

'Is that you're best shot, little man?' he said through blood-stained teeth. Rain caused the red liquid to trickle down his face and stain his shirt.

Axel knew that now was the right time. He stood still and concentrated. His Oriental teachers had shown him

how to use 'the power of the dragon'. They described it as a way of channeling the body's natural energies into a single punch. It was impressive, effective but drained the user of energy.

He concentrated and tried to ignore the insults Barbon was throwing at him. He focused and drew all of his strength together in one fist. He was unaware of the rain, the blood in his mouth or the pain in his head.

There was a whistling sound in his ears then he shot forward. He caught Barbon under the chin with a punch that seemed to be on fire. People watching nearby could almost swear they'd seen a fiery dragon surround the hero's fist.

The impact lifted both Barbon and Axel off their feet. There was a cracking noise and the big barman hit the ground and lay still. Then there was silence. Axel collapsed in a heap on the floor, drained of energy.

As he lay there, a sultry figure walked over and stood at his feet. A woman's voice drifted down to him and a hand reached out to help him up.

He staggered to his feet and stared at the person before him. She appeared to be one of the blonde waitresses from the bar. But as he stood there, smiling, she took off the wig and long, auburn hair flowed.

Axel couldn't believe it. He hadn't seen her for four years. She smiled at him and spoke.

'Hi, Axel! Remember me?'

Of course he did. He hadn't spoken her name for years but the memories came flooding back in an instant.

It was Blaze Fielding.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The four heroes had nearly succeeded in destroying Barbon's bar, as they had done to the man himself. Axel fully recovered after half an hour's rest and Blaze told him what she was doing in the city and what she knew of Adam.

After their toppling of Mr Big's empire and the subsequent media circus, Blaze had returned to Washington DC and her old job as a secret service agent. After a few years, she joined an elite intelligence group known as STRIKE.

This team was sent to the four corners of the globe to keep an eye on radical governments and other organisations. She proved herself time and time again as a valuable field agent and was given her current assignment just over a year before.

She was ordered to investigate the current build up of organised crime. As the government had suspected, Mr Big's empire did not topple. Instead, a new crime boss had taken over — Mr X. Blaze was told to infiltrate the criminal set-up and destroy it from within.

Then word reached her that Adam had been kidnapped by the mob as revenge for Mr Big's downfall. She'd been posing as a waitress to find out more. Her sources thought he was being held captive by one of Mr X's crazed bodyguards, in the tower where the heroes defeated Mr Big.

'And that's where you guys came in!' she said.

Axel got to his feet. 'This is it, then. We know where Adam is and why he's being held. Let's go get him!'

He turned to the door and started to leave when

Blaze called to him.

'Axel! We've gotta be careful. Mr X is using some weird henchmen. I'm talking grade-A sickos here! Mercenaries, convicts, robots and even creatures I never knew existed!'

Axel smiled. 'Let's give a good fight, then!'

■■■■■

By now, the battle at the bar had reached the ears of every thug Mr X employed. They were all waiting for the heroes as they made their way to the crime boss's skyscraper headquarters.

Along the way they encountered a crazed ex-boxer in the docks, lunatic bikers on the city bridge, a park filled with cut-throats and petty hoods, and streets seething with jet-packing thugs, ninja warriors, Thai kick-boxers and muscled madmen. All had been defeated.

The battered and bruised warriors had finally reached the secret base of Mr X. They entered the lobby cautiously, prepared for an attack. It never came.

They took the elevator to the penthouse. It rose slowly to the top floor. The doors slid open and the four heroes stepped out.

Seated in front of them was Mr X. Beside him stood a muscled Japanese warrior, who held an unconscious Adam by the neck. Mr X yelled at his bodyguard.

'Shiva! Finish this, once and for all!'

The Oriental man dropped Adam and leapt through the air, screaming. He never touched the floor. Blaze launched herself forward and performed a backflip

that connected with the ninja warrior's head. The man groaned and was flung backwards toward the window.

He didn't stand a chance. The glass shattered on impact and Shiva fell to the street below, screaming as he went. Mr X was shocked for a split-second but soon recovered. He reached down to the side of the chair and snatched an automatic pistol from a hidden holster.

Mr X went for Adam. He wasn't quick enough. Skate darted forward and knocked the man flying with a well-aimed roundhouse kick. Axel moved in and broke the crime boss's wrist; the gun fell to the floor. Finally, Max dashed over and picked up the madman by the neck, holding him off the floor.

'Your reign of terror is over, pal!' he snapped. And with a squeeze of his hand, Mr X's life faded.

He dumped the body on the floor. Blaze and Skate were at Adam's side, helping him to recover, when Axel and Max came over.

The young fighter stared groggily at the people before him.

'Hey... hey, what are you doing here? The last I remember, I was walking to the gym and...' He stumbled forward and was caught by Axel.

'It's okay, pal, you're safe now. We all are.'

As the group moved toward the window, they could hear the drone of an army helicopter Blaze had called. The chopper would take them to safety and a new life.

The city was safe once again.

EPILOGUE

From the shadows, the man watched intensely. He'd kept a close eye on what had happened in the last few minutes and could see the body of Mr X lying where it had fallen. The heroes were standing by the window, watching the helicopter descend.

The time was not right for him to emerge just yet. Once the do-gooders had gone, he could start all over again and become an even better crime boss than his predecessor could ever have hoped.

The man known as Mr Brown squirmed in the secret room but smiled at the thought of his new career. Before him lay a city that was still dazed. He would rise up from the ashes like a phoenix and take total control of Mr X's organisation. With it he would achieve supreme power.

And there was no one who could stop him. At least, there wouldn't be for the next five years...

The End